DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 172 237 CS 204 896

AUTHOR Gorrell, Donna K.
TITLE Controlled Composition: Sentence Manipulations for Basic Writing Students.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (30th, Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 5-7, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Assignments; *Composition (Literary); Higher Education; *Remedial Instruction; *Sentence Combining; Student Improvement; Syntax; Teaching Techniques; *Writing Exercises; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Controlled Composition

ABSTRACT

Controlled composition--a method closely related to sentence combining--can be beneficial for college students whose writing is characterized by frequent errors and lack of fluency. Controlled composition consists of copying short, competently written compositions exactly except for certain stipulated changes. The assignments, which progress in complexity, require students first to make exact copies of the compositions; then to make such changes as rewriting plural constructions in the singular, present tense constructions in the past tense, and active voice passages in the passive; and finally to combine sentences through coordination or subordination. Instead of terminology and rules, models for the new sentences are provided as guides; errors are corrected by students, with teacher help as necessary, until the compositions are error-free. Similarities between controlled composition and sentence combining include their use of prewritten compositions or sentences, their assumption of students' underlying knowledge of grammar, their use of a minimum of technical terminology, and their tendency to lead to error reduction, improved writing, and improved student attitudes toward writing. Controlled composition can serve as an introduction to sentence combining for basic writing students, who are frequently confused by sentence combining and create error-prone free sentence combinations. (GT)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED172237

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Donna K. Gorrell

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

Donna K. Gorrell
Illinois State University
Normal, Illinois 61761

CONTROLLED COMPOSITION: SENTENCE MANIPULATIONS FOR BASIC WRITING STUDENTS

Back in B.C. Rome a famed rhetorician named Horace was recommending what he called "the labor of the file"--this task of revising and polishing that must be applied to writing before it can honorably represent our ideas to the minds of others. Yet after all these ages we are still pondering how to go about this irksome and tedious task. We may know that a sentence doesn't do a very good job of expressing our idea, but revising it so it does is another matter. We exchange some words for others and start moving parts around, but we may also end up with something worse that what we started out with: stilted phrasing, pretentious diction, dangling modifiers, or something we English teachers characteristically describe as "awk."

For basic writing students the situation is even worse. Added to ineffective phrasing are numerous errors, with the need for correction accompanying that of revision. Various methods of teaching revision have been tried, and some have worked. One of the most promising in our own time is sentence combining, which has been shown repeatedly to bring about syntactic maturity in students at all levels of learning. Likewise, various methods of error reduction have been tried--but with very few positive reports. Students taught the basics of grammar and usage end up the semester doing very well on their grammar exercises but failing to practice these skills in their writing.

CS204896

Sentence combining claims some success in error reduction, even though this has not been its goal. Students who practice its various manipulations and transformations seem to acquire not only a sense of the options available for revision but also a sharper awareness of conventional usage. Unfortunately, sentence combining is frequently beyond the capabilities of basic writing students. It is for these students--those whose writing is characterized by frequent errors and lagging fluency--that I recommend and use a method I suggest is closely related to sentence combining: controlled composition.

This method for bringing about error reduction and revision practice has its origins in TESL--the teaching of English as a second language. It appeared in the 1960's at Teachers College, Columbia University, where it was used to raise the writing proficiency of graduate foreign students. Early texts employing the method were developed by Christina Bratt Paulston and Gerald Dykstra.[2] It was a natural transferral when only a bit later in the 60's controlled composition came to be used with native students. Linda Ann Kunz and Robert R. Viscount devised a course for teaching written communication skills to inner-city job applicants at the Chase Manhattan Bank in New York City. Their text, Write Me a Ream, published in 1973, evolved from this experience.[3]

I suggest that controlled composition can be closely compared to sentence combining and that, like sentence combining, it can produce salutary effects on the writing of students. Let me explain what I mean by first describing controlled composition, then comparing the two techniques, and finally suggesting how controlled composition is better than sentence combining for the basic writing student.

Controlled composition, sometimes called guided writing or controlled writing, consists of short compositions that are rewritten according to certain prescribed instructions. The first "step," or rewriting exercise, is frequently to make an exact copy. "Super-simple," you say, and so think the basic writing students--until they encounter "it's" with an apostrophe, or a quotation with commas and quotation marks, or a spelling demon like "beginning" or "accommodate." "Exact copy" was the instruction. That means no errors. At the heart of controlled composition is the stipulation that compositions must be one hundred percent error-free before the task is completed.

Methods of handling this requirement vary. Kunz and Viscount, as well as Paulston and Dykstra, call for a rewriting of the incorrectly executed step, using a different passage. Kunz and Viscount, for example, have twelve passages that can be used for the step one, exact copy, assignment, and Paulston and Dykstra in Controlled Composition in English as a Second Language provide three. Thus, a student who makes an error in transcribing step one will have to repeat the step, making an exact copy of a different composition. A student in this way is saved the monotony of repeated work on the same passage while acquiring facility with the assigned step.

I feel, however, that a basic writing student who has only one or two, or even a few, minor errors will resent the time it takes to start all over with a new passage and may, in fact, as a result of his disgruntlement make more errors the second or third time around. I therefore circle the errors and return the paper for correction, which then is given back to me to be rechecked. Or sometimes, when there are structural errors, I ask for a rewrite of the same passage. In cases when students are having real trouble completing an assignment, on the other hand, they undoubtedly welcome a second passage.

So far we have looked at only step one, exact copy. However, the real advantage of controlled composition is the sentence manipulation it requires. Students, instead of being instructed in grammar rules and rehearsing them through exercises, are asked, without elaborate terminology, to make use of the grammar they are already carrying around in their heads. By the time students come to college--even students who need basic writing practice--they have talked enough and read enough and been taught grammar enough that they have in their heads all the information they need in order to write grammatical sentences - linguistic competence, in other words. Even students who have spoken Black English Vernacular all their lives have, with few exceptions, read enough books and watched enough television and attended enough school that they know which noun and verb forms take an s ending. What these students need is practice writing what they know while at the same time being given freedom from trying to remember rules and also from the pressures of composing an idea on paper.

So, with controlled composition a student is provided a passage and asked to rewrite it, making certain changes. The assigned manipulation is the step, all of which progress in complexity. A third-person plural definition, for example, is to be rewritten in third-person singular, with all corresponding verb, pronoun, and other changes also being made. Another possible assignment for the same passage is that it be rewritten in past tense. Instead of terminology and rules, a sample sentence of the new model is provided as a guide. English teachers will be skeptical that basic writing students can accomplish such a task with no more instruction than provided. However, some of them can do it with no errors. Others misplace some commas, or misspell a word, or omit an endquote. Others miss some of the forms more directly aimed at--the verb inflections, some of the pronouns. But no matter what the errors,

each one would be circled, and when the compositions were returned to the students, in most cases the errors would be recognized and corrected--with little difficulty. Sometimes teacher help is needed, and should be provided, but the student makes the correction. Upon completion of an assignment, the student goes on to the next one.

Some of the steps are extremely difficult and give students much trouble. The hardest, I think, are the active/passive changes. A passage written in active voice must be rewritten in passive, and vice versa. Here a student needs some guidance in how the manipulations take place: that in passive voice the doer of the action goes into a "by" phrase or is not named, that the verb assumes a form of "be" and an -ed ending (and this requires some explanation), and that the receiver of the action is placed first in the sentence. Besides the beneficial effects of these linguistic calisthenics, these two steps also provide opportunity for discussing some of the appropriate and clever uses of the passive - for example, as a way to get around certain pronoun problems. By the time they've finished these steps, students know much more about sentence structure than ever before, thus increasing their options for production and revision of their own writing.

As controlled composition approaches the end of the assigned steps, it bears a closer resemblance to sentence combining. Students are asked to combine sentences through coordination or subordination. They are asked to manipulate phrases, or to convert post-modifying phrases to pre-modifying adjectives. At this point it becomes apparent that controlled composition is a natural introduction to sentence combining. Students who have practiced these sentence manipulations have acquired the undergirding that is prerequisite for open sentence combining.

Some of the similarities of the two techniques have already been seen. In addition to their overlap, another obvious similarity is the predetermined content. Controlled composition, as I use it, provides short pre-written compositions for manipulative rewriting, and sentence combining as it is most commonly used supplies kernel sentences. Both techniques likewise assume an underlying knowledge of grammar to be tapped in the practice exercises, while technical terminology is kept to a minimum. Neither technique, however, presumes to be a total writing program; they are meant to complement self-generated composition.

A further similarity of controlled composition and sentence combining derives from the benefits of each. A requisite effect of any basic writing program is error reduction, and controlled composition, through the frequent production of error-free writings, claims this effect.[4] As yet, however, there is no quantitative evidence of this position. Sentence combining, as previously noted, though not aiming for error-control does claim the same effect because of what O'Hare terms an "acceptant, non-error-oriented environment."[5] Again, there is no specific quantitative evidence of error-reduction, although confirmation of a hypothesis of superior overall quality with sentence combining would lend support to such an assertion.[6]

Improved writing is cited as a benefit of both controlled composition and sentence combining. The studies of Mellon, O'Hare, and Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg have demonstrated that syntactic maturity and overall writing quality do accrue from sentence combining practice.[7] For controlled composition Dykstra and Paulston, together with Kunz and Viscount, report observations of improved quality of writing, to which I add my own conviction. However, controlled composition still needs to demonstrate through controlled research that there is an effective transfer from the controlled manipulations

of predetermined sentences to the free composition of original ideas.

Both sentence combinists and controlled compositionists link the effect of improved writing to the third benefit cited by each, that of a positive attitude toward writing. The non-error-oriented environment seems to lead to both improved writing and a positive attitude toward writing. In a severely limited study at Illinois State University in the summer of 1978, a basic writing class of thirteen students using controlled composition (along with grammar instruction, self-generated writing, and journal writing) reported in a Likert-type survey a clearly favorable attitude toward both controlled composition and writing in general. In another limited attitudinal (1979) study, a basic writing class using controlled composition was compared to a freshman composition class which had had some limited sentence combining practice. The data analysis, contrary to common opinion and most statistical reports, revealed significant differences in attitude toward writing. Although the size limitation of both studies prohibits inferences much beyond the sample groups, the favorable attitude indicates that controlled composition merits further use as a writing activity in basic skills classes, in conjunction with further investigation as to its effectiveness and acceptability for those who are practicing it.

Considering, then, the affinities of controlled composition and sentence combining--their similar aims, assumptions, methods, and benefits, it is my suggestion that controlled composition be used in basic writing courses as an introduction to sentence combining. I contend that basic writing students will show greater improvement in writing and attitude toward writing if they first devote a semester to controlled composition before moving into sentence combining.

I find that basic writing students are frequently confused by sentence combining. They are not simply seventh-grade or ninth-grade writers thrust into the college situation. They are disabled college writers, with the thoughts and attitudes and maturity of college writers. So even though sentence combining has been used successfully at the junior high level, notably by Mellon and O'Hare, it is not necessarily the panacea for the writing problems of basic level college writers. What happens when these students are told to combine a series of kernel sentences? They combine them, because they are supposed to, but their sentences, in almost every assignment, have dangling or misplaced modifiers, fused and fragmented sentences, and faulty punctuation. These writers shy away from direct quotes or use them inaccurately. Their clause combinations demonstrate an incomplete understanding of coordination and subordination, including the use of relative pronouns. And their sentences frequently are such incomprehensible mazes that classmates and teacher alike despair of converting them into meaningful structures.

Now, granted, errors can be dealt with in class, thus providing opportunity for extrapolation to the broader audience. However, in my opinion it's better to give students practice using correct sentence patterns before requiring them to create error-prone free sentence combinations. What controlled composition does is similar to the benefits known for centuries to accrue from imitation. Both Corbett[8] and Weathers and Winchester,[9] emulating Roman schoolmasters, prescribe exact copying, followed by imitation of the model, for the learning of valuable lessons about sentence structure. While this apprenticeship is beneficial for all writers, it is especially so for those who are disabled. For them, this rehearsal of competent writing provides requisite skills for communicating their own ideas.

Controlled composition utilizes this kind of apprenticeship. The basic writer is given a competently written passage to copy exactly as it is except for certain stipulated changes. The writer learns from both the exact copying and the manipulations. By the time the entire course of study is completed, the basic writing student will have practiced much proficient writing, have performed many manipulations that were formerly bugbears, and have gained enough self-confidence in writing that freshman composition with its quantity of self-generated and fixed content writing and revision will no longer be approached with apprehensive reluctance.

Donna K. Gorrell
Illinois State University
Normal, Illinois 61761

Notes

[1]Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer, Research in Written Composition (Champaign, Ill.: NCTE, 1963), p. 37.

[2]Christina Bratt Paulston and Gerald Dykstra, Controlled Composition in English as a Second Language (New York: Regents, 1973),

[3]Linda Ann Kunz and Robert R. Viscount, Write Me a Ream, with Handbook (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia Univ., 1973).

[4]Paulston and Dykstra, p. viii.

[5]Frank O'Hare, Sentence Combining: Improving Student Writing without Formal Grammar Instruction, Research Report No. 15 (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1973), p. 32.

[6]O'Hare, p. 63.

[7]John C. Mellon, Transformational Sentence Combining, Research Report No. 10 (Champaign, Ill.: NCTE, 1969);and Max Morenberg, Donald Daiker, and Andrew Kerek, "Sentence Combining at the College Level: An Experimental Study," Research in the Teaching of English, 12 (Oct. 1978), 245-56.

[8]Edward P. J. Corbett, Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), p. 496.

[9]Winston Weathers and Otis Winchester, Copy and Compose: a Guide to Prose Style (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 2.